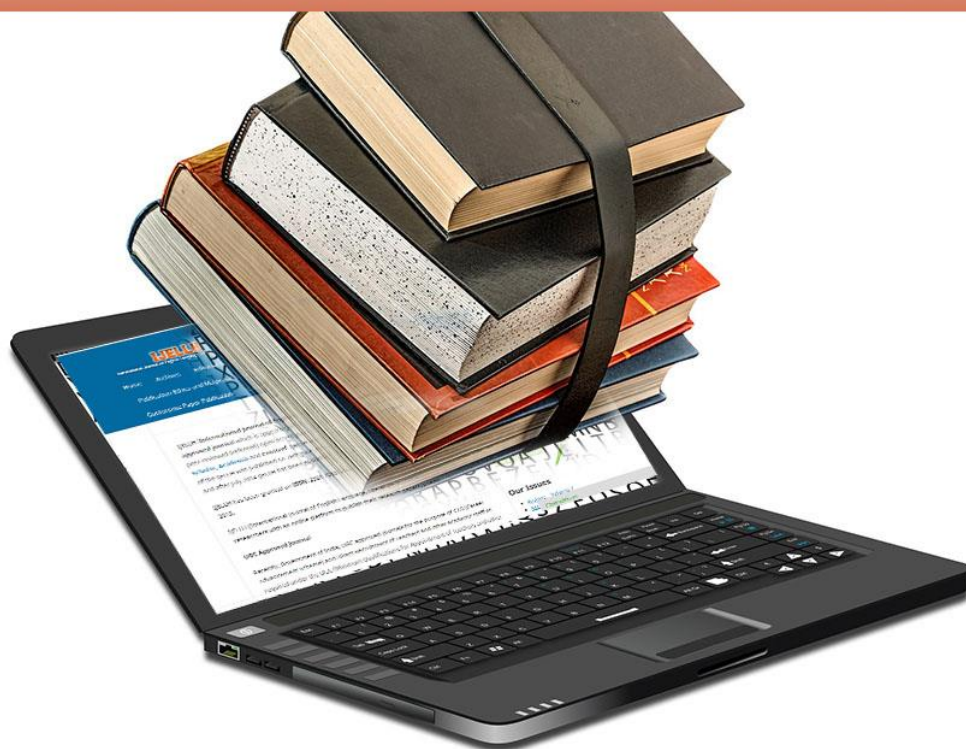


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## Threatening Wives, Jealous Husbands: Reading *Mappila* Letter Songs as Gendered Community Histories

### Abstract

This paper is about a literary sub-genre called *Kathupattu*, or letter songs, from the Southern tip of India – Kerala. The Malabar Muslim community from the region, the *Mappilas*, has a rich tradition of literary and cultural expressions. The particular genre in *Mappila* songs that the article examines became popular after the 1970s in the context of migration to the Middle East from Kerala. It is popularly called Dubai *Kathupattu* or Dubai letter songs. This article plans to examine the portrayal of the figure of the wife and the husband in two of the most popular *Kathupattus* – the “Dubai *Kathupattu*” and “*Marupadi kathu*” (“Reply Letter Song”). The trial is to ask whether we can consider these popular cultural genres to write a gendered history of the community.

Keywords: Gender, *Kathupattu*, Kerala, *Mappila*, Masculinity, Migration

### 1. Introduction

This paper is about a literary sub-genre from the Southern tip of India – Kerala. The Malabar Muslim community from the region, the *Mappilas*, has a rich tradition of literary and cultural expression. The canon of Malayalam literature has, unfortunately, ignored this rich tradition mostly.

This paper intends to examine *Kathupattu*, a particular genre in *Mappila* songs as literature. Nallalam Beeran, a versatile author of *kathupattus* of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has described the particular characteristic of the genre in the following words: “It can be read as a letter and sung as a song as well.” (qtd. in Karasseri, *Pulikkottil Krithikal* 20). There is a wealth of material available in Malayalam and Arabi-Malayalam<sup>i</sup> on this genre. It is usually associated, in contemporary times, with a specific sub-genre called *Dubai kathupattu*, or Dubai letter songs, a generic description for all letter songs connected to Gulf migration.<sup>ii</sup>

Writing letters using the manner of a song was very popular among the Mappila poets (Karasseri, *Moyinkutty Vaidyar: Kalayum Kaalavum* 7; Nediyanadu 73; Tharamel 55) Moyinkutty Vaidyar, the great literary personality of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century from the community has, among other genres, also produced *Kathupattus*.<sup>iii</sup> *Dubai Kathupattu* emerged in 1970s after the gulf migration of *Malayalis* from Kerala to the Middle Eastern countries.

### 1.1 Why Study *Kathupattu*?

This particular genre is not often considered to be a serious form of expression. Even historians of this genre describe it as representing the “naivety of youth and confessions of love” (Kutty 47). This dismissal might be happening because of the politics of dismissing popular culture itself as “not serious.” But it might also be happening because issues of intimacy and desire itself are dismissed. Along with its form and subject, *Kathupattu* also was relegated into the realm of the non-serious.

But, this paper wishes to see *Kathupattu* as representing a particular memory/history of the community. The attempt in this paper is to see if we can read a new gender history of the community through this important popular cultural genre.

The succeeding parts try to place *Kathupattu* in the literary traditions of the Mappila community by examining some of its earlier forms or references to travel.

### 1.2 *Kathupattu and its Literary History*

Travel and thus, migration seems to be part of the community history of *Mapplias*. *Muhyadheen Mala* written in 1607 (Kadar 285) is considered as the first *Mappila* song. Qazi Muhammed of Kozhikode was the author of this classic text. Here, I am referring to this older history of Mappila cultural production to draw a history of connection to the trope of travel, especially travel in sea, which appears as a metaphor of life itself as the travel in the work. The ship and the sea are used by many Islamic texts as the symbol of human life and death. *Kappappattu*, a philosophical poem written by Kunjayin Musliyar (AD 1700), an 18th century mystic poet is another important early work. The title means “The Song of the Ship” or “The Dhow song.” After the publication of *Kapappattu*, there emerged a genre of *Mappila* songs named as *Safeena* songs (ship songs) (Nediyanaad 17).

*Burma Pattu* is another important category of letter songs which emerged after 1930s during the time of what came to be called the “eastern migration.”<sup>iv</sup> These people had to leave their families in Kerala and their feelings of separation as a result of this migration led to the emergence of this variety of songs. This is the direct ancestor of what later became the genre under discussion, *Dubai Kathupattu*.

In the *Mappila* song history, one can see several kinds of *Kathupattus*. It emerged as love songs/romantic songs and also functioned as a medium for sending letters to the beloved ones incarcerated during the *Mappila* rebellion of the early 20th century.<sup>v</sup> Pulikkotil Hyder’s celebrated letter song “*Mariyakkutty Kathupattu*” (Karasseri 104) is an important song which was produced in the context of the 1921 rebellion. Drawing from all this long history of

travel, migration and separation from loved ones, it was only after the 1970s that Dubai *Kathupattu* began to emerge.

## 2. Plan of the Paper

Dubai *kathupattu* emerged in the context of migration from Malabar to the Middle Eastern countries. The themes of the songs are pain, sorrow, familial issues, especially spousal issues etc. S. A Jameel's (1941-2011) contribution to Dubai *Kathupattu* is considered crucial. There was a spate of letter songs after his writings became popular as songs. The conceptual questions that are dealt with in the chapter are connected to questions of women's writing. The thesis asks the question, if women's voices can come through a male Writer? Though apparently patriarchal, the songs probably can also be seen as hiding the Mappila wife who is left out from migration and her sensibilities through a male writer's voice. The thesis then examines whether migration has led to the emergence of a new conjugality with the emergence of women's interiority expressed through her separation with her husband.

Then the close reading of the two iconic songs, popularly known as the Dubai letter song in the female voice and its Reply song in the male voice are dealt with in detail. The first song is seen as an expression of female desire and the second song, through its suggestions of threat and jealousy is seen as the hidden stories of migration, which have produced fractured masculinities (and not just the success stories of financial stability) as well.

### 2.1 *Pining Wives and Distant Husbands: Production of New Conjugalities in Migration*

The voice of the letter songs is that of the separated wife, left behind writing to her husband in the Persian Gulf. The *Marupadi kathu* or reply letter song is in the voice of a husband writing to the wife, as a reply to her letter. It is to be noted that the circulation of these songs were hardly through the printed medium but through festival song fests and cassette culture.

Now, the archive of the 70s and 80s, when this was most popular among the community is available in the internet. The *Mappila* husband and the wife had to invent a the mode of communication - the letter - during the Gulf migration. The song follows the usual conventions of the letter - saying “everything is alright here” and “may you be well and good,” in the opening and closing of the letters. The expressing familial and spousal problems in very suggestive ways and not directly speaking follows the genre of letter writing in general and matrimonial communication in particular. It is very interesting that the cassette culture of the late 70s and 80s also introduces the wife and the husband communicating through recorded tapes that would be sent through people who travel between the Gulf and Kerala. Thus, someone arriving from the Gulf bearing gifts passed on from the husband was a much awaited event in migrant families. The intimate communication between the husband and the wife was passed on through a recorded cassette which was never listened to publically by the family. (A letter might not be a very private thing, though the Gulf did produce some amount of privacy between the couples by the separate letter to the wife. The telephone call was hardly private being placed in the middle of the most public place in houses). Often the wives were staying behind with the in-laws families or often in her own natal homes. (The Gulf migration also produced the culture of many wives deciding to stay with their own parents after marriage, maintaining a formal but distant relationship with the in laws).

S. A. Jameel wrote two letter songs of which one is the Dubai *Kathupattu* (Jameel 81-84; Thasleem) and the other one is *Marupadi kathu* (Jameel 84-86; Aluva). These have iconic status in the *Mappila* song history and the paper will be examining these two texts especially. Both of these deal with the theme of separation and longing.

Jameel wrote this *Dubai Kathupattu* in 1977 for a program in Abu Dhabi. This song was a new experiment in the history of *Mappila* letter songs. He used a local Malabar Malayalam. As a counselor, he had access to the intimate fears and anxieties of his women patients and used this material.

Most of the letter song writers were male. But, if what authors like S.A. Jameel, whose iconic letter songs this paper deals with, is to be believed, the idea comes to him through many years of interaction with *Mappila* brides taking his help to write the letters or express their situation through mental breakdowns which reached him as a counselor. We can ask, if these are also genres where the *Mappila* woman's voice has been captured for history?

## 2.2 Female Desire in Kathupattu

Love or desire is the common theme of the letter songs. For this purpose, sometimes the writers use metaphors of separation or doubts.

Love related letter songs were not a new venture for the *Mappila* community, earlier poets like Moyin Kutty Vaidyar, Pulikkoottil Hyder, Nallalm Beeran etc and later poets like Bappu Velliparamba, V M Kutty, O M Karuvarakkundu etc have also proved their acumen through this genre.

The narrative voice of the *Kathupattu* uses the separated woman's voice at one point, mixing longing with desire, the pain of separation with erotic memory:

Thoughts of those sweet days

Replays as memory

Those cupid's dreams,

Embraces me tight.

Scented nights on this earthly shower

And, ah! The bridal bed beckons.

How will I sleep, though supine?

How can I rest, even if I sleep?

These fresh dreams of our honeymoon

Will shudder me awaken.

And I embrace tight

This, my lonely pillow.(Jameel 82).<sup>vi</sup>

The contradictions that have ensued from migration, the riches that have been bestowed on the state and its inhabitants with it, also seems to have had other effects expressed in cultural products like letter songs. The deep tensions of the wife and her sorrows are expressed in the line: "I have enough gold, money, gulf dresses and I have a beautiful house also / but without you all these are useless" (27-28). The riches that migration has brought are explained in the consumer articles particularly associated with the Gulf. Yet, she sees herself as "burnt in the ashes of separation" (35). The song continues in this vein with the use of the extreme metaphor of death and destruction, to express the separated wife's lamentation.

Yet, it is also a warning, a threat. Jameel's famous lines in the voice of the wife, warns that if the husband does not come back very soon, things might get out of control!"I am hardly a *malak* (an angel), but a hot blooded woman, you know!" (66), warns the wife. These words, a mild threat that warns the husband of her desire and the possibility that she might explore other relationships if he waits more to come creates community panic, expressed through the reply song in the male voice. One can perhaps see it as the fear of female sexuality that is expressed through the reply song.



### 2.3 Doubts or Jealousy as a Theme of Kathupattu

Masculinity theorists (Connell) have worked on how oppressive ideas of ideal maleness are for men themselves. One of the most important works on Gulf migration and masculinity says: “(M)igration appears as particularly relevant to masculinity in its enhanced relationship with money, an externalizable (detachable) form of masculine potency” (Osella and Osella, 117). This paper also sees the “failure” that seems to necessarily follow these success stories of masculinity.

Along with separation and longing, doubts and jealousy, a sign of failed masculinity, is an important ingredient in the letter songs. While longing and separation mostly are played out through/on the wife in the writing of S A Jameel, the finger of the doubt is always also pointed towards them. However, in the *Dubai Kathupattu* one cannot see enough examples of these kinds of doubts being directed towards men, though there is a significant warning that she also has physical and emotional needs.

The dignity of the family is closely related to the chastity of women and not the men's. The status of men is also predicated on the same. The songs warn in the male voice: “Opportunity is the mother of needs / and the one who gives the opportunity is a fool!” (36-37). This self disparagement facing the possibility of an extramarital relationship of the woman should be read as a masculinity crisis engendered through migration.

Strangely, a harsh language of self-deprecation is used in the reply song to describe the apparently successful masculinity model – the migrant man who is earning enough to build a huge house and support his family. It is expressed in words like “*Ponnan*” (One who is not sensible), “*Viddikalude Nethav*” (the head of goofies), “*Moori*” (In Malabar this word is used refer to castrated bulls considered to be asexual), all used by the husband's voice to describe himself. The successful family man suddenly starts seeing himself as a subordinated

masculine figure, who fails to control his wife's desires and ambitions. The "fractured masculine" figures are the category he represents in all these lines.

One can also perhaps read the actual changes that would have produced differing masculinities and femininities as a result of migration. Did the separation from the husband also give more decision making power in the hands of the *Mappila* woman left behind in the home state? (Gulati WS-43) Is this also a context to read these songs?

### Conclusion

The trial in this paper was to see two iconic texts in the *Mappila* song/literary history to read the gendered life of the community in connection with Gulf migration. The celebration of migration as having produced an economically stable Kerala has to also be read in the context of the emotional turmoil that would have resulted as a result of it. The effects on the women and the men have been separate and gendered and this genre could perhaps be seen as encapsulating community histories.

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<sup>i</sup> Arabi Malayalam is a writing system- a variant with the Arabic script used for Malayalam alphabets.

<sup>ii</sup> There is plethora of works related to migration. But most of them deal with the economic and social impact of migration. For more details see the various works published by Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram especially the works of K.C Zachariah and Irudaya Rajan from 1999 to 2014 and the recent book on migration in 2018; also see Raman 2010 and 2012; Khan 2014. The anthropological studies of Osella and Osella (2000,2007,2009) deal with the cultural questions of *Mappila* migration. My work draws from this school of work.

<sup>iii</sup> For more details see the work of Vallikkunnu titled "Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyarude Kavya Lokam" (The Poetic World of Moyin Kutty Vaidyar).

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<sup>iv</sup> As a result of colonial policies along with earning purposes, many *Mappilas* migrated to eastern countries like Burma, Singapore, Malaysia, Ceylon etc during 1930s. (Raman).

<sup>v</sup> The Malabar rebellion was an armed uprising in 1921 against British authority by the *Mappilas*. This has been variously seen as a communal revolt (Nair, Hitchcock) or a peasant uprising (Panikkar) by various scholars. The production of the “fanatic Muslim” figure draws from the discourses built around this rebellion (Ansari).

<sup>vi</sup> Translation from original Malayalam is the author’s.